

By Joseph A. Ciccolo

Preparing Students for Careers, Not Just Jobs

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MASSACHUSETTS, HOME TO SOME OF THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION,

has also been a leader for decades in the delivery of career and technical education (CTE). Across the state of 351 cities and towns, there are 26 regional CTE school districts and dozens more technical wings in comprehensive high schools. CTE institutions such as Blue Hills Regional Technical School, located in Canton, take students from grades nine through 12 and attract students from the towns in their district. They offer complete academic course offerings, along with sports and other extracurricular activities. A state-approved admissions policy keeps the process fair and equitable; but for the last decade, double the available spots have been applied for with only about 230 freshmen accepted each year from approximately 14 sending public and private middle schools.

The Attraction

Students decide to come to Blue Hills for a number of factors such as having a family member as a graduate or a relative working in one of our technical areas. Some may apply because they think the school's schedule will result in 50 percent less academic class work. (This is hardly so because of the embedded academics required by Massachusetts' State Vocational Frameworks.) Others come to Blue Hills because it offers them a sense of belonging—something they often won't get when they are herded through academic high schools. They are bombarded for four years with the message that it is expected that everyone will go to college—the one-size-fits-all approach. But at Blue Hills students get a more personal approach. The

decision making is supported by information to digest using career ladders, tech prep and U.S. Department of Labor statistics, along with hands-on activities. If you're a high school student and NASCAR is something you like outside of school, preparing a biographical presentation of your favorite driver, building a mock-up of a race track, rebuilding a high performance engine, or welding a frame together and going to a raceway with your class to try out the class project is certainly more exciting than regurgitating abstract information.

The Curriculum

Blue Hills has a buffet style offering of 14 programs during the exploratory freshman year. The first half of the semester is spent exploring all programs; students then concentrate on eight and select a major to pursue in the second semester. Fifty percent of a student's time is spent in the technical labs using a "week about" system, and the other half is spent studying academics. The school offers interdisciplinary activities so students see the need for reading, writing and math, and many of the academic concepts found in technical labs emphasize what they have been learning in the classroom.

These experiences and relationships they develop in the labs play a big role in students' success. And when they graduate from Blue Hills, they do so with a dual education: All state requirements are met for a high school diploma, and they receive competency recognition for their technical achievement.

Teachers and advisory board members from Blue Hills and other technical high schools participated in the development of 44 state frameworks comprised of six strands (which are incorporated in the

school's curriculum): health and safety, technical skills, embedded academics, entrepreneur skills, business skills, and principles of technology. The framework instruction is complemented by work for customers—sometimes during the ninth-grade exploratory.

Results

Massachusetts has its high-stakes test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), and because of the different academic levels of the sending school districts, it is a challenge to get students “test ready” for sophomore year. But Blue Hills is doing just that with good results. In 2004, 2005 and 2006, Blue Hills’ failure rate on the MCAS math test declined by 17 percent. In math, the proficiency index (students receiving a scaled score of 240 or higher) rose 18 percent and the percentage of students scoring in the advanced category more than doubled. In English Language Arts (ELA), the failure rate declined to 1 percent, and the ELA proficiency index rose by 12 percent. When compared to its sending districts, Blue Hills’ has a higher proficiency index and one of the lowest failure rates on the MCAS.

Support for our Programs

There is growing support for CTE schools such as Blue Hills because the outcomes and successes of graduates are evident upon graduation. This is partly due to the fact that the state department of education and the Carl D. Perkins Act require positive placement in order for schools to sustain funding and state certification. In addition, our district communities still have a great need for blue collar employment while new businesses are developing in the bio-manufacturing and growing in the health care sectors. Blue Hills’ student base is quite similar to those across the state, and even includes second generation graduates. Many alumni are active in our foundation, and as a subgroup they developed the Adopt-A-Shop program to

encourage other graduates in successful businesses to donate materials and monies to their respective technical programs, and the school as a whole.

Imagine eighth-graders giving up study periods, drama club, art and music, for a full schedule of classes and technical train-

ing. Students are around adults while they learn and work at something they love, and have academic teachers who encourage them to use that knowledge and desire in projects for their classes. It’s easy to see why we graduate young adults prepared for a career, not just a job. **T**

Blue Hills students learning the skills they need for their future careers in today's workforce.

